# The Rude, the Bad and the Bawdy

Essays in honour of
Professor Geert Jan van Gelder

*edited by*

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# The Foul-Mouthed *Faḥla*: Obscenity and Amplification in Early Women's Invective

*Marlé Hammond*

> A woman, when she writes, wants to become a *faḥl* ([a stallion] like a stallion of the poets, for example), but the language instead turns her into a *faḥla*, and we must not be deceived by this 'sound' etymological declination. For *faḥla* in the dictionaries is a sharp-tongued one (*al-Qāmūs al-Muḥīṭ*): she who uses her tongue as a sword. Hence the derivation (from *faḥl* to *faḥla*) does not preserve the meaning of the (of course masculine) origin. The derivation is irregular.[1]
>
> ᶜAbd al-Majīd Jaḥfa

> Le dérivé d'un genre deviant péjorative quand il désigne l'autre genre.[2]
> A word derived from one gender becomes pejorative when it designates the other.
>
> Tahar Labib Djedidi

Elsewhere I have argued that the use of sexually explicit or obscene language and imagery is a tacit if often unacknowledged criterion of *fuḥūla* – that quality of poetic 'prowess' or 'machismo' that in the Arabic tradition distinguishes the outstanding poets from those who are merely accomplished.[3] Another criterion, and one which is widely recognised, is that the poets should excel in the genre of *hijāʾ* (invective or satire) and be

[1] ᶜAbd al-Majīd Jaḥfa, *Saṭwat al-nahār wa-siḥr al-layl: al-fuḥūla wa-mā yuwāzīhā fī l-taṣawwur al-ᶜArabī* (Casablanca: Dār Tūbqāl, 1996), 38.

[2] Tahar Labib Djedidi, *La poésie amoureuse des Arabes: le cas des ᶜUd̲rites* (Algiers: Société Nationale d'Edition et de Diffusion, 1974), 17. Jaḥfa's annotations led me to this source.

[3] See 'On Stallions, Viragos, and Tears', Chapter 1 of my monograph *Beyond Elegy: Classical Arabic Women's Poetry in Context* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 29–58.

able to defeat their rivals in versified slinging matches.[4] There would appear to be a link, then, between the *faḥla*, or 'sharp-tongued' woman, and the celebrated male poet, even if there is no 'stallionette' in the classical Arabic poetic canon.[5]

There are accounts of women poets defeating their male counterparts in rounds of flyting,[6] and their poetic aptitude was judged accordingly, but far more common in female-authored literature are poetic jibes recounted as if they are addressed to husbands and lovers, men of whom the poets would have had intimate knowledge. Large swathes of Ibn Abī Ṭāhir Ṭayfūr's *Balāghāt al-Nisāʾ*, a ninth-century treatise on women's eloquence,[7] are devoted to what women have had to say in prose or verse about the merits and inadequacies of their husbands. A great deal of this material is patently folkloric, unattributed to any particular individuals and/or highly formulaic in its presentation, and much of it contains material that is either erotic or obscene.[8] The formulaic presentation manifests itself in a kind of escalation, whereby there is a tendency to move from the trivial to the egregious, in the case of faults, and from the mildly admirable to the sublime, in case of merits. Insults get worse and worse, compliments get better in better, and in both cases there may be a tendency for the traits described to become increasingly sexual.

## THE FORMULA

This kind of momentum can be found in the longer folkloric anecdotes where unnamed figures speak in turn, such as in the version of the *ḥadīth* of Abū Zarʿ that occurs in Ibn Ṭayfūr's *Balāghāt al-Nisāʾ*. ʿĀʾisha reports that one day the Prophet said to her, 'To you, I am like Abū Zarʿ'. 'O Messenger of God', she replies, 'who is this Abū Zarʿ'? Muḥammad

[4] See, for example, Adonis, *al-Thābit wa-l-mutaḥawwil*, vol. 2: 'Taʾṣīl al-uṣūl' (Beirut: Dār al-ʿAwda, 1977), 37–46.

[5] Al-Khansāʾ famously ranks among the most celebrated poets and appears in Ibn Sallām al-Jumaḥī's *Ṭabaqāt fuḥūl al-shuʿarāʾ*, but the class to which she belongs is called '*ṭabaqat aṣḥāb al-marāthī*' ('masters of elegies' rather than 'stallions of elegies'). See Hammond, *Beyond Elegy*, 36.

[6] One such famous exchange of invective between a man and a woman where the latter was judged (at least retrospectively by the critics) to be the winner occurred between Laylā l-Akhyaliyya and al-Nābigha l-Jaʿdī. See Muḥammad ʿAbd al-Qādir Aḥmad (ed.), *Fuḥūlat al-shuʿarāʾ li-Abī Ḥātim al-Sijistānī: taḥqīq wa-dirāsa* (Cairo: Maktabat al-Nahḍa l-Miṣriyya, 1991), 125.

[7] The treatise is one of three surviving parts of a much longer work on prose and verse called *Kitāb al-Manthūr wa-l-manẓūm*. See the introduction to Muḥsin Ghayyāḍ (ed.), *al-Manthūr wa-l-manẓūm: al-Qaṣāʾid al-mufradāt allatī lā mathal lahā* by Abī l-Faḍl Aḥmad b. Abī Ṭāhir Ṭayfūr (Beirut: Turāth ʿUwaydāt, 1977), 23.

[8] I should note here that there is an entirely separate section dedicated to the anecdotes about the *mawājin*. This section, which is even more heavily folkloric, contains humorous, titillating and disturbing reports about illicit sexual encounters between women and various other entities. Most reports involve completely anonymous figures, but there is a collection of *akhbār* featuring the legendary Ḥubbā of Medina. For a discussion of this notorious *mājina*, see Fedwa Malti-Douglas, *Woman's Body, Woman's Word: gender and discourse in Arabo-Islamic writing* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 45–8.

then told the story of eleven women in the pre-Islamic period, five of whom denigrated their spouses and six of whom praised theirs. The first of the censurers complains that hers is skinny; the second that hers is sickly and impotent; the third that hers is a ravenous eater and shuns physical contact; the fourth that hers is gangly and keeps her suspended in a state of limbo between marriage and divorce; the fifth then reveals that her husband's faults are so numerous that she fears her words would be too long. The six admirers of their husbands then speak: the first says hers is neither hot nor cold, neither fearsome nor boring; the second that hers smells nice; the third that hers has an excellent physique; the fourth that hers is brave and has a healthy libido; the fifth that her husband, Abū Mālik, has lots of camels and is very generous with them; and finally the sixth says that her husband, Abū Zarʿ, found her among herders of camels and made her a keeper of horses, and she then goes on to explain at great length how her husband fulfilled her every need. One day Abū Zarʿ divorces her, and when she remarries a wealthy nobleman she declares that the latter could never measure up to the former. ʿĀʾisha then seals the narrative, quoting Muḥammad as saying that to her he was like Abū Zarʿ to Umm Zarʿ.

This pattern of escalation in degree of intensity and especially in intensity of physicality that occurs in the above anecdote and is particularly noticeable with the first three responses of each category of wife also manifests itself in the shorter *akhbār* related by Ibn Ṭayfūr. Consider, for example the following statement, uttered by a woman whose husband pleads for her to praise/deride[9] the qualities she knows in him, as she has done to a previous husband. Much to his regret, she publically pronounces the following:

اعلمك اذا اكلت احتففت واذا شربت اشتففت واذا اشتملت التففت واعلمك تشبع ليلة تضاف وتنام ليلة تخاف واعلم عينك نؤمة واستك يقظة وعصاك خشبة ومشيك لبجة[10]

> I know you to gobble up when you eat and gulp down when you drink, and you get twisted up when you cover up. I know that you fill up on a guest night and you sleep on a fright night. I know that your eye dozes while your anus stays awake, and that your cane is rigid though your walk is limp.

These formulaic patterns seem to predominate in the more anonymous, more folkloric *akhbār*, but their impressions are also felt in the anecdotes related about historical figures such as the narratives embedding the verses of Ḥumayda, daughter of the Companion to the Prophet, al-Nuʿmān b. Bashīr (d. 684 CE). I have chosen Ḥumayda because she epitomises, perhaps, the *faḥla*, or the sharp-tongued woman who, like the *faḥl* or 'stallion

[9] The expression 'athnā ʿalā' (أثنى على) means either to praise or to deride someone for a certain quality, and it comes up in some of these anecdotes especially in the imperative uttered by the husband and addressed to the wife. One can read these commands in two ways: either the husband is expecting to be praised and instead is ridiculed; or the husband enjoys his spouse's invectives and eggs her on. The latter reading is often reinforced by the fact that the husband often responds in kind to the jibes.

[10] Ibn Ṭayfūr, *Balāghāt al-Nisāʾ*, 87–8.

poet', is celebrated for her scathing invective. Ḥumayda is said to have married three men and satirised each in turn. Drawing primarily on the content of Ibn Ṭayfūr's *Balāghāt al-Nisāʾ* and al-Iṣfahānī's *Kitāb al-Aghānī*, works dating from the 3rd/9th and 4th/10th centuries respectively, in the following exploration of the 'obscene' or at least 'scatological' content of her *hijāʾ*, I will attempt to locate echoes of this folkloric pattern of escalation and ask whether the historical 'chronological' narrative surrounding the stories either reinforces or obstructs these patterns.

## ḤUMAYDA BT. AL-NUʿMĀN: SATIRICAL MONOGAMIST

Abū l-Faraj al-Iṣfahānī sums up Ḥumayda's character as follows:

كانت شاعرة ذات لسان وعارضة وشرّ، فكانت تهجو أزواجها[11]

'She was a poet with tongue, contrariness, and evil, and she would satirise her spouses.'[12] Hence she seems a fine candidate for the *faḥla* sobriquet. When one reconstructs her marital career from the various anecdotes circulating about her interactions with her husbands, one finds an escalation in the fierceness of the invective, particularly with regard to its scatological content and humour derived from bodily functions and sexual drives. This escalation would seem to represent a folkloric impulse, a folkloric impulse which is not necessarily unhistorical or ahistorical, but rather reflects a mode of representation which was either resisted or de-prioritised by the scholars who were recording the anecdotes in writing; husbands 1, 2 and 3 retain their chronological positions, but this chronology loses control of the sequencing of the written narrative.[13] In these books of belles-lettres, Husband #2, who as a one-time governor of Palestine is the most historically prominent of the three, comes to the fore, and the main story becomes one about Ḥumayda's marriage to him rather than about the escalation of tension in a series of marriages.[14] The positions of husbands 1 and 3 are either

[11] Abū l-Faraj al-Iṣfahānī, *Kitāb al-Aghānī*, ed. Iḥsān ʿAbbās et al (Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 2004), 16:38.

[12] Arie Schippers refers to this same passage in his piece 'The Role of Women in Medieval Abdalusian Arabic Story-Telling', in Frederick de Jong (ed.), *Verse and the Fair Sex: Studies in Arabic Poetry and in the Representation of Women in Arabic Literature* (Utrecht: M.Th. Housma Stichting, 1993), 140.

[13] Vladimir Propp argues that early literature, or what is often termed 'belles-lettres' is almost entirely 'reflected and refracted folklore'. See *Theory and History of Folklore*, trans. Ariadna Y. Martin and Richard P. Martin, ed. Anatoly Liberman (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 13. One definitely gets that sense here; for even though Ḥumayda is a 'historical' figure, it could be that her persona was inserted into a pre-existing narrative.

[14] According to their respective entries in the second edition of the *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, Rawḥ b. Zinbāʿ was 'especially prominent in upholding the Umayyad cause against the Zubayrids in the second civil war' while al-Nuʿmān b. Bashīr 'declared openly for ʿAbd Allāh b. al-Zubayr' after Yazīd b. Muʿāwiya's death in 683. See G.R. Hawting, 'Rawḥ b. Zinbāʿ', *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd edition, Brill Online, 2012, School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), 29 December 2012, and K.V. Zetterstéen, 'al-Nuʿmān b. Bashīr', *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd edition, Brill Online, 2012, School of

destabilised or deemphasised in the narrative sequencing, and the folkloric pattern is somewhat repressed.

## *Husband #1*

The first husband whom she is said to have satirised is identified as either al-Ḥārith b. Khālid b. al-ʿĀṣī b. Hishām b. al-Mughīra or Khālid b. al-Muhājir b. Khālid b. al-Walīd b. al-Mughīra:[15]

نكحت المدينيّ إذ جاءني فيالك من نكحة غاوية
كهول دمشق وشبّانها أحبّ إلينا من الجالية
صنانٌ لهم كصنان التيو س أعيا على المسك والغالية[16]

I married the Medinan when he came to me
O what a misguided marriage
The men of Damascus, old as well as young
Are preferable to me than the émigrés
They have the body odour of billy-goats
A smell that defies all musk and ambergris

And so her first husband, we learn, was smelly. This is not, on the face of it, a particularly stinging or obscene smear. Yet an investigation of the word *ṣunān* reveals a certain sexual innuendo. While its basic meaning, according to Lane is a 'stink or stench whether of the armpit or otherwise', it is often applied to 'the odour of the he-goat when excited by lust'.[17] Since the word for male goats (*tuyūs*) appears alongside *ṣunān* the implication is clear: the husband smells bad when he is horny. In the *Aghānī*, the husband's supposed response, insinuating that Damascene ladies smell like rotten hides although they smear their *ṣunān* with musk, is set as a song.[18] Thus, I suppose the feeling was mutual.

## *Husband #2*

If husband number one smelled like a randy goat, husband number two, Rawḥ b. Zinbāʿ (d. 703), had even more repulsive traits. At least one of these traits is rather transparently a poetic conceit, as it is based on a double entendre involving the name of her husband's tribe: Judhām – the name means 'leprosy'.

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Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), 29 December 2012. It may be that political tensions between the pro-Umayyad husband and the pro-Zubayrid father fed into the folklorization of the fractiousness of Ḥumayda's marriage to Rawḥ.

[15] Al-Iṣfahānī, *Aghānī*, 9:168.

[16] Al-Iṣfahānī, *Aghānī*, 9:168.

[17] Edward William Lane, *Arabic-English Lexicon* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1863–7), *ṣ – n – n*.

[18] Al-Iṣfahānī, *Aghānī*, 9:168.

بكى الخز من روح وأنكر جلده وعجت عجيجاً من جذام المطارف[19]

The Silk whined about Rūḥ and disdained his skin
Whilst the Shawls clamoured about the Judhām

Leprosy is not the only trait she impugns in him, for it turns out that Rawḥ, much like her first husband, reeked. Consider the following exchange of insults Rawḥ initiates with Ḥumayda:

أَثْني عليّ بما علمت فإنني مثن عليك بنتن ريح الجورب[20]

Deride me for what you know, for I
Deride you for the stink of your socks

فثناؤك شرّ الثناء عليكم أسوى وأنتن من سلاح الثعلب[21]

Your derision is the vilest of you all
Worse and more noxious than the thin dung of a fox

Notice that much as was the case with the first husband, Ḥumayda associates him with a bad odour emitted by an animal. Yet it is not simply a case of repetition but of escalation: she complains not of the smell of an effusion (body odour) but rather of the smell of an emission (excrement). Another poetic utterance by Ḥumayda makes a further link between the undesirability of the husbands:

وهل أنا إلّا مُهرةٌ عربيةٌ سليلةُ أفراسٍ تجلّلها بَغلُ
فإنْ نُتِجَت مُهراً كريماً فَبِالحَرَى وإنْ يَكُ إقرافٌ فَمِن قِبَلِ الفَحْلِ[22]

Am I nought but an Arab filly,
the offspring of horses, who has been mounted by a mule?
If she gives birth to a noble colt, then that's only fitting
But if it's a hybrid, that's down to the male.[23]

In the above poem Ḥumayda ridicules her husband for his inferior breeding; after all, as a daughter of a Companion to the Prophet, one imagines it would be difficult for a spouse to compete with her pedigree. But there is also a sense in which she ridicules him sexually – the idea of a mule 'mounting' a filly is counterintuitive since a mule is the

[19] Ibn Ṭayfūr, *Balāghāt*, 95.
[20] Ibn Ṭayfūr, *Balāghāt*, 96.
[21] Ibn Ṭayfūr, *Balāghāt*, 96. Al-Iṣfahānī, *Aghānī*, 9: 170.
[22] Al-Jāḥiẓ, *Kitāb al-qawl fī l-bighāl* (Cairo: Muṣṭafā l-Bābī l-Ḥalabī, 1955), 121. Ibn Ṭayfūr, *Balāghāt*, 96, has 'taḥallalahā' instead of 'tajallalahā'.
[23] Al-Zamakhsharī cites this line as evidence that the word *iqrāf*, which here refers to miscegenation, is used specifically in those cases where it is the father who is non-Arab, as opposed to *hujna*, which would refer to cases where it is the mother who is non-Arab. See *Asās al-Balāgha* (Beirut: Maktabat Lubnān, 1996), *q-r-f*. He does not attribute the line to Ḥumayda.

barren offspring of a horse and a donkey. One wonders if she is not also asserting her poetic supremacy when she calls herself a *muhra*, and strips the word *faḥl* of any positive association with male prowess or fecundity.[24] Indeed, one could say that she divests it from all connotations apart from anatomical masculinity and imbues it with negativity through its association with *baghl*, that is both its parallel positioning as a rhyme word and the fact that it too refers directly to the object of her satire. This contention that Ḥumayda is in effect claiming for herself the poetic status of *muhra* as a linguistically viable parallel to *faḥl* could be countered by the observation that there is a fault in the prosody of the couplet, a fault known as *iqwāʾ* whereby a rhyme word is in the wrong grammatical case, forcing either a syntactical error or a discordant vocalisation of the rhyme. This particular *iqwāʾ*, however, strikes me as exquisite, especially if we read *baghlū* as the rhyme carrying the fault. The *baghl*, quite simply, is out of place: it should be the offspring of a filly not the mate of one. As al-Jāḥiẓ remarks in *Kitāb al-Qawl fī-l-bighāl*, the poet has used the term outside its usual context (*fa-waḍaʿat al-baghl fī ghayri mawḍiʿih*); the mule is wrong, the rhyme is wrong, the husband is wrong.

## *Husband #3*

If husband number one smelled like a randy goat, and husband number two was leprous, had loose stools, and was an inadequate mate, husband number three, who, incidentally, we are told was very handsome, turned out to be the most disgusting of them all. Here again there is wordplay: the name of her third husband, Fayḍ, which has a basic meaning of 'overflowing' and is associated with generosity, has enormous scatological and sexual potential, and most of the jibes Ḥumayda directs against Fayḍ feature his name and test the boundaries of its associations, as in the examples below:

سميت فيضاً ولا شيء تفيض به  إلا بجعرك بين الباب والدار[25]

Your name is Fayḍ but you overflow with nothing
Save your excrement between door and dwelling

الا يا فيض كنت أراك فيضاً  فلا فيضاً وجدت ولا فراتا[26]

Did I not think of you Fayḍ as overflowing?
But no water did I find, neither flowing nor sweet

[24] Something similar occurs in an invective by Nazhūn addressed to a male satirist. There, the rhyme word is *mudhakkar*. As an attribute of the poem's addressee, namely his masculinity, the word accrues a lot of negativity through its association with negative rhyme words. As an attribute of the poet Nazhūn's verse, it takes on the positive meaning of 'mentioned'. See *Beyond Elegy*, 144, or my original article 'He Said "She said": Narrations of Women's Verse in Classical Arabic Literature – a case study: Nazhūn's *hijāʾ* of Abū Bakr al-Makhzūmī,' *Middle Eastern Literatures* 6.1 (2003), 11.

[25] Ibn Ṭayfūr, *Balāghāt*, 97.

[26] Ibn Ṭayfūr, *Balāghāt*, 97.

While the first verse above makes a very explicit association between Fayḍ and an identifiable bodily emission, the second is rather cryptic; the *fayḍ* of the second hemistich would seem to me to refer to semen, and Fayḍ's lack thereof. An insistence on interpreting the image as a bodily emission is, I think, justified, both because of all the other verses that refer to these emissions explicitly, and because of the framing narratives, which describe Fayḍ as an alcoholic who would vomit in Ḥumayda's lap.[27] A third invective directed against Fayḍ represents the climax of Ḥumayda's scatological verbal abuse.

وليس فيض بفياض العطاء لنا  لكن فيضا لنا بالسلح فياض
ليث الليوث علينا باسل شرس  وفي الحروب هيوب الصدر حياض[28]

Fayḍ does not overflow with gifts for us
Rather he is overflowing [*fayyāḍ*] with loose stool for us
A scowling ill-tempered lion when he sets on us
Yet in wars he is timid of bosom and [*ḥayyāḍ*]

I leave *ḥayyāḍ* untranslated for the moment, both because among all the versions of the poem I have consulted the word occurs uniquely in Ibn Ṭayfūr, and also because it is such a provocative image that it resists 'fluid' translation and my rendering of this image into English would at least initially be dismissed by the reader as unlikely, as it must have been by all those redactors who no doubt thought that they were correcting an error in transcription when they rendered *ḥayyāḍ* '*jayyāḍ*', meaning 'cowardly' or 'fleeing'.[29] *Ḥayyāḍ*, however, yields a much more forceful indictment of the husband's character, and one which fits into the trajectory of her imagery of bodily emissions. It translates as 'menstruating' or 'overflowing with menstrual blood'. Talk about unsound etymological derivations! If a woman cannot be a 'stallion', surely a man cannot menstruate, and yet this is precisely the force, the viciousness, and the ingenuity of Ḥumayda's verse. Apart from the fact that one of the basic meanings of the verb *ḥāḍa*, which is nearly always conjugated in the feminine, is 'to menstruate', as noted by the editor of the *Balāghāt* in connection with this image,[30] my substantiating evidence for this reading is threefold.

First, the context in which the couplet appears, that is both the neighbouring verses and the narrative framework, suggests, as I have demonstrated, a preoccupation with bodily fluids and emissions. Not only do we have numerous references to these (to body

[27] Ibn Ṭayfūr, *Balāghāt*, 97; Al-Iṣfahānī, *Aghānī*, 9: 172 and 16:38.

[28] Ibn Ṭayfūr, *Balāghāt*, 98.

[29] Al-Iṣfahānī, *Aghānī*, 9:172. This word is also found in Ibn ʿAsākir, *Tārīkh Madīnat Dimashq*, ed. ʿUmar Ibn Gharāma al-ʿAmrāwī (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1995–1998), 69:100. *Jayyāḍ* means 'fleeing from the enemy' (al-Zamakhsharī, *Asās al-Balāgha*, *j-y-ḍ*), and certainly makes sense in the context of the line. Curiously, this word, too, may be said to evoke menstruation, albeit indirectly. According to al-Zamakhsharī (*Asās al-Balāgha*, *ḥ-y-ḍ*), one says of a man whose habit is to flee and run away that he nearly menstruates:

فلان ديدنه أن يحيص ويجيض ويوشك أن يحيض

[30] Ibn Ṭayfūr, *Balāghāt*, 98, note 2.

odour, to excrement, to vomit, [to semen]) but we also see a progressive escalation from least to most offensive, from least to most repulsive. Second, the words *fayyāḍ* and *ḥayyād*, *fayḍ* and *ḥayḍ*, are semantically linked, as they are both associated with water and its abundant flowing. Third, menstrual imagery is not uncommon in women's poetry – or men's for that matter – and is associated in particular with the battlefield, which is precisely where Ḥumayda places Fayḍ in this hemistich. The association stems mainly from images of menstruation in early elegies and blood-vengeance poetry; both the corpse of the deceased and his surviving kinsmen are sometimes portrayed as 'polluted' or 'defiled' by menstrual blood, as Suzanne Stetkevych has shown.[31] One also finds a lexical connection between menstruation and war in words derived from the root *ʿ – r- k*, although no such word is used here.[32]

It would seem that Ḥumayda's whole literary and marital career was all building up to this, the ultimate of put-downs. Earlier, and in verses not cited here, she had cast feminizing aspersions on her second husband, Rawḥ,[33] but she saves the best for last, so-to-speak, and targets Fayḍ for this particular jibe, associating him with what is perhaps perceived as the most repugnant bodily emission, and one that is normally confined to the female of the species, one which, in its non-intensive form, *ḥāʾiḍ*, does not normally take the feminine marker when applied to a woman, since only women bleed in this way.

## SEQUENCING AND THE SERIAL MONOGAMIST

The pattern of amplification is discernible in the sources but diluted somewhat due to the scholarly interventions of the redactors of Ḥumayḍa's corpus. As I mentioned earlier, as the most historically significant husband, Rawḥ is privileged, occupying more of the narrative's attention. In Ibn Ṭayfūr her marriage to Rawḥ, their versified exchanges as husband and wife, and Ḥumayda's exchanges relating to this marriage with third parties come first and consist of some forty lines of text. Fayḍ enters in to the narrative in the context of her marriage to Rawḥ; her marriage to Rawḥ ends with the latter predicting that she will find a husband who will slap her and vomit in her lap.[34] This third marriage, her verses devoted to her third husband, and the story of an exchange she had with al-Ḥajjāj b. Yūsuf after their daughter married him consume only about seventeen lines of text. Finally the first husband comes last and consumes about fourteen lines. The sequencing of the narrative thus upsets the pattern of escalation; however Ibn Ṭayfūr's redaction of her poetry perhaps best preserves the amplification inherent in what I think

[31] See Suzanne Pinckney Stetkevych's book, *The Mute Immortals Speak: Pre-Islamic Poetry and the Poetics of Ritual* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), 66–7, 172–5, 194–6, 227, as well as her article 'Sarah and the Hyena: Laughter, Menstruation, and the Genesis of a Double Entendre,' *History of Religions* 35.5 (1996), 13–41.

[32] See Stetkevych, *Mute Immortals*, 172–4.

[33] See Ibn Ṭayfūr, *Balāghāt*, 97, and al-Iṣfahānī, *Aghānī*, 9:171, where she accuses Rawḥ of lining his eyes with kohl like an adulterous prostitute (مومسة زانية).

[34] Ibn Ṭayfūr, *Balāghāt*, 97.

of as the 'original' folkloric narrative through the retention of at least one key item of vocabulary: *ḥayyāḍ*. Two accounts of Ḥumayda's marital career are found in the *Aghānī*, once in the chapter on al-Ḥārith b. Khālid, who is sometimes identified as Ḥumayda's first husband, and once in the chapter on her father al-Nuʿmān b. Bashīr and his progeny.[35] In both of these accounts, the chronology of the marriages is retained in the narrative sequencing, thus the potential for the amplification is formally unperturbed. However, in the second account, which is very short, there are no references to bodily emissions in the verses addressed to Rawḥ, so the sense of escalation is muted somewhat. The first account, which resembles the narrative of Ibn Ṭayfūr quite a bit, apart from its repositioning of the first husband of the start of the narrative, does contain a reference to Rawḥ's bowel movements, so the sense of escalation created by the sequencing of odour→excrement→vomit is maintained. However, the sense of escalation here too is diluted in part by the unequal attention to the husbands – once again Rawḥ predominates – as well as the fact that *jayyāḍ*, 'fleeing', is substituted for *ḥayyāḍ*, 'menstruating'. By the time the narrative appears in Ibn ʿAsākir's twelfth-century *Tārīkh Madīnat Dimashq*,[36] the momentum of escalation is almost entirely lost; although the chronology of the husbands is maintained, the insults directed against them do not really relate to one another. No bodily emissions are evoked, except in the verses about Fayḍ. She does not address any poetry to Rawḥ at all, although she does insult his tribe in prose. What seems to take the place of that section of the narrative that would normally be devoted to her exchanges of insults with Rawḥ are a couple of elegiac fragments mourning the passing of her father.

## CONCLUSION

Ḥumayda's verses and their narrative embedding thus offer us insights into two questions that beset aficionados of Arabic women's writing, one being a question of literary history, the other of grammar. Regarding what we perceive as the diminishment of women as poets after the coming of Islam, and especially after the Umayyad era, a diminishment that would seem to coincide with the transition of verbal culture from an oral phase to a written one, the folkloric pattern inherent in both her words and their narration and the way in which the redactors of her story interfered with this patterning captures an intriguing moment of literary history. This moment has implications for men's verse as well as women's, obviously, but it may also help to explain how the eventual predominance of the written over the oral affected or distorted the images, innuendos and structures which may have characterised women's poetry in particular, since the males recording women's words in writing were not necessarily privy or attentive to their nuances.

On the question of grammar, Ḥumayda's verses demonstrate the flexibility of gender division in the Arabic language, which, in my opinion is too often seen as inherently rigid,

[35] Al-Iṣfahānī, *Aghānī*, 9:168–73 and 16:38–9.

[36] Ibn ʿAsākir, *Tārīkh madīnat Dimashq*, ed. ʿUmar Ibn Gharāma al-ʿAmrāwī (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1995–1998), 69: 98–101.

sexist, and therefore oppressive for its female if not also its male users. Too often the grammatical markings of femininity are understood as diminutive, while the masculine, the *faḥl*, is thought to reign supreme. One never seems to consider the possibility that Arabic, with its absence of 'neuter' – that is with its categorisation of all nouns and all verb conjugations as either masculine or feminine – may provide more opportunities for meaningful subversions than a language that does have the category of 'neuter'. To my mind there are two instances of such subversions in the verses cited above. When Ḥumayda calls herself a *muhra*, she is acknowledging that one may not add a *tāʾ marbūṭa* to the *faḥl*, since its basic meaning is 'male'. Yet one may add a *tāʾ marbūṭa* to *muhr*, since its basic meaning is 'horse'. She cannot be a 'stallionette', but she can be a 'filly'. Meanwhile, by associating the *faḥl* (stallion) with the *baghl* (mule), she divests the former of its connotations of sexual procreativity and good breeding, and links masculinity with sexual inadequacy. The other subversion is, of course, *ḥayyāḍ*. I do not think this intensive adjective is a common way of expressing 'menstruating', and therefore I cannot comment on the absence of a feminine marker, but the active participle *ḥāʾiḍ* does not need to take one. By describing her husband as 'menstruating', she clearly subverts the lexicon at the same time that she conforms to grammar.

On a final note, I would like to revisit a claim I made at the opening of this essay, that the best poets are often assumed to be those (men) who excel at sexually explicit satire. Not everyone would agree with this generalization; for it seems that some preferred invective of an innocent and dainty variety. As Geert Jan van Gelder relates in his book *The Bad and the Ugly*, the eighth-century *qāriʾ* Abū ʿAmr b. al-ʿAlāʾ is often quoted as saying, 'the best *hijāʾ* is what a virgin may recite in her private room without impertinence'.[37]

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